

PROPER TREE CARE

The Maryland Tree Expert law requires owners/managers of tree care operations to obtain a tree expert license. This licensing is designed to promote proper tree care, safety, and honest business practices. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) oversees tree expert licensing, and is also the agency that handles violations of tree care law. Although some might wonder why regulation of the tree care industry is necessary, once you consider the impact that unsafe or improper practices can have both financially and environmentally, it makes sense to have accountability for those who might cause harm.

The DNR adheres to the tree care standards set by the Tree Care Industry Association and International Society of Arboriculture, known as the ANSI A300 standards (American National Standards Institute standards for tree care and arboriculture operations). Practicing tree experts should be well-versed in the requirements of these standards. However, through years of habit, there are still some who continue to use techniques proven through research and experience to damage and eventually destroy trees. An educated consumer can recognize these techniques and avoid tree care companies that suggest or use them. Look out for:

Lion Tailing - This refers to the removal of smaller branches along a large branch. The foliage is left on the end of the branch, causing it to look like a lion's tail. This makes trees more vulnerable to wind damage and decay, as top bark is exposed to the heat of the sun.

Topping - This term describes over-pruning a tree by cutting it directly across the top leaving no protective leaves on the branches. Topping allows the sun to burn the tender bark on the top of branches, causing it to peel, and revealing phloem cells (nutrient transport) in the tender layer underneath. Decay sets in where protection of bark is gone and works down into xylem cells (water transport cells) and heart wood (structural support). This decay can cause the tree to become hollow, and structurally unsound. Decay can also travel to the roots and create root rot, and the stress to tree can attract insects and disease. Trees that have been topped can appear healthy because phloem cells are still intact in cambium layer (outer layer under the bark). This condition also stimulates sprouts that make the tree appear lush and green, although the sprouts are not well secured to the topped branch and can easily split from the tree as they grow larger. A skilled arborist can determine if a tree is damaged or compromised in this way. Topping a tree creates a dangerous tree and is illegal.

Mulch Rings - Proper mulching benefits tree health by controlling soil temperature in extreme heat and cold, retaining moisture, reducing competition from grass roots, controlling weeds, and preventing lawn mower and string trimmer damage. However, improper mulching causes irreversible damage to a tree. When mulch is applied properly, only a very thin layer should be near the trunk of the tree. Mulch depth can then increase as the mulch ring extends away from the trunk to a depth of about 2-3', ideally to the drip line edge of the tree's outer canopy. Excessive mulch depths at the trunk are more harmful than beneficial. Excessive mulch can cause stem decay, root decay, and girdling roots. Girdling roots encircle the trunk, often growing above ground level, reducing the flow of nutrients to the tree. This can compromise establishment of a secure root system, leading to the tree's premature decline and increasing the risk of tree failure.